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CHRISTMAS IN A HOSPITAL

By FLORENCE M. ANGELL

THERE were sixteen children in the pavilion, and each one had been asked what he or she wished most to have. The night before Christmas we found the air full of that mysterious expectancy which belongs to Christmas Eve. The walls were hung with ropes of evergreens, and Christmas wreaths, sent by their ever-thoughtful friends, decorated every bed. Harry, the little boy who for two years had been confined to his bed, was going to enjoy the Tree *this* year from his own point of view, instead of being on his back as heretofore. He had evidently given the new boys an idea as to what to expect on the morrow, and all were jubilant, for the experience of the Christmas Trees had made him, in the estimation of the other children, a most important personage. I should have said all but one were jubilant, for the boy whose only request had been a tool-chest was in a good deal of pain. I said, "Do you think you could get to sleep and forget the pain if you knew you would surely get that tool-chest in the morning?" "I am sure I could," was the reply. Then the secret was whispered in his ear, "It's on its way here now," and as we left the room he called out brightly, "I'll be all right in the morning."

Christmas morning the children were moved into the nursery, while the Tree was hung with electric globes of many colors, gorgeous balls, strands of the Christ-Child's hair, and presents of every description. By noon the committee, with some of the house doctors who lent a helping hand, pronounced the Tree perfect.



CHRISTMAS IN A HOSPITAL

At four o'clock the children were arranged in their beds and chairs in a semicircle before the Tree, and all who have tried to dress children for a party, when they were dancing with excitement, will realize what the nurses had gone through in making sixteen little ones so pretty and attractive for *their* party. Many pretty garments sent from various homes, the gifts of thoughtful mothers, were gotten out for the occasion and added not a little to the brightness of the scene. The rest of the room was entirely filled with the friends of the children and those most warmly interested in the hospital, and the nurses.

The carol, "It came upon the midnight clear," was very attractively sung by the nurses, after which a kindergarten teacher, whose interest in the children has been shown many times, told a story of "The Stately Fir-Tree" that stood out in the country grieved and dejected because each of its neighbors had had something to give to others from the fulness of their autumn fruits, while it alone was barren.

"One morning men came and cut down the unhappy tree, and carried it to a city and into a large room where there were little children; and it found itself on Christmas Day laden with just the kind of fruit children love best; so it was no longer unhappy, because it had felt the pleasure of having something to give to others."

The children listened with rapt attention, and this story bore fruit on the following morning, when a new child was brought into the pavilion, for when the nurse said, "Children, what are we going to do, —this little girl has had no Christmas?" he it proudly recorded that one child said, "She can have my doll with the eyes that open and shut;" another said, "She can have my game of bicycle," and so on until the new-comer had fared quite as well as the others. Verily, the story had not been told in vain. But to return to our narrative.

The strains of that always beautiful Christmas hymn, "Adeste Fideles," filled the room. The voices of the two nurses sounded very sweetly in the duet for soprano and contralto, and then at the moment when all the voices took up the last refrain, the Tree apparently sprang into being, ablaze with light and beauty.

Never before had so many people remembered the hospital children. Packages and bundles came from far and near containing just the things that boys and girls like best.

Dolls, baby carriages, games galore, iron toys, fire-wagons, ice-wagons and buckboards, with a tool-chest—yes, the tool-chest was there, and as it was laid beside the owner on his bed, it was a self-evident fact that one boy's dearest wish had been realized. This proved to be Johnny's last Christmas on earth. During the months that preceded his death, his tool-chest was his dearest possession, and he never

wearied of shaping blocks of various sizes until his little arm grew too weak at last to hold the required tools. It lends a deeper interest to the Christmas work for these little ones when we realize that in many, many instances it is to be their last Christmas.

The children in the contagious pavilion across the lawn were not forgotten, but had a miniature Tree to themselves, a fac-simile of the large one, candles being substituted for electric lights, and dolls, games, books, etc., hung on its branches; and although shut off from parents and friends, the day was not without its joy.

As the presents were distributed it became apparent that Santa Claus had not stopped with the children, for doctor and nurses were obliged to respond to their names, and more often than all was the name of the superintendent called, until one of the trustees kindly stepped forward to her assistance, for her arms were full. This also the children enjoyed heartily, for they are very fond of their best friend.

Those of us who can recall a ringing voice at home, vigorous with bounding health, go to these little ones with a peculiar sympathy. To many of them the memory of such a Christmas goes through life, and their association with the hospital becomes one of pleasure rather than of pain.

Those who spend their lives in caring for sick children bear witness to their marvellous patience under suffering. We are told, and it is true, that suffering is a discipline, and if bravely borne brings strength of character; but theologians and philosophers, both alike, are dumb before the sufferings of little children. There is but one answer—God certainly loves them far better than we do. We should esteem it a great privilege, when He gives us the opportunity, to alleviate the pain that children have to bear.

